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Opinion

The Failing Inspector

By Amy E. Smithson
April 8, 2002

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Just as the Bush administration speaks of widening its war against terrorism -- to Iraq and other countries with programs to acquire weapons of mass destruction -- the treaty designed to eliminate chemical weapons and prevent their proliferation appears headed for collapse. In mid-March, Washington let it be known that it would halt payments to the international agency that monitors the Chemical Weapons Convention until its director, José Bustani, packs his bags. Mr. Bustani refuses to go, and without American contributions, in May the inspection agency could find itself so short of cash that all inspections could come to a screeching halt.

Just when every effort should be made to strengthen mechanisms to prevent proliferation of dangerous weapons, this dispute could undermine the five-year-old chemical weapons treaty, which is already wobbling, partly because of a cash-flow shortage so severe in 2001 that the agency could not conduct its full slate of planned inspections at military and industry sites.

On March 22, only five countries, including Mr. Bustani's native Brazil, supported him in a vote of confidence in the treaty's Executive Council; 17 voted no confidence and 18 abstained -- a diplomatic way of saying the same thing. Now Mr. Bustani insists that all 145 nation members of the treaty vote on his fate in a meeting later this month, a costly process that his cash-strapped agency can ill afford.

In circumstances like this, one may be tempted to root for David over Goliath. But Mr. Bustani's managerial abilities have been subjected to broad criticism, and the Bush administration is correct in asserting that his priorities are misaligned. In January 1998, he fought for pay equal to that of the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, an inspectorate three times the size of his. As he concentrated on the paycheck dispute, treaty members voted themselves the right to photocopy inspectors' notebooks. The treaty stipulates that these notebooks are inviolable so that inspectors can record evidence of possible foul play without fear of retribution. Mr. Bustani got his raise, but his inspectors' ability to do their jobs was undercut. This is one of several reasons why morale at the inspectorate has plummeted in the last few years.

Some say the dispute over Mr. Bustani is just an excuse for the Bush administration to torpedo another multilateral convention. If that is not the case, then the White House must work to restore the inspectorate to its full potency.

Just ousting Mr. Bustani will not necessarily bring stronger inspections. The 1997 American legislation to ratify and implement the treaty contained exemptions that opened loopholes for other nations to refuse both so-called challenge inspections (made at sites where cheating is suspected), and extensive analysis of samples. These exemptions must be overturned.

For the sake of the integrity of the inspection agency and the international chemical weapons ban, Mr. Bustani should step aside now so that the inspectorate can recover its political support and return to its vital business. For its part, the Bush administration would serve American security interests well by once and for all throwing Washington's full weight behind this important treaty.

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